



GOUNOD

The Pipers

A steady pulse in the left hand, fleet fingerwork in the right and a wide range of dynamics will help you bring extra zest to this energetic and fun piece, explains teacher and author **Melanie Spanswick**

Ability rating Beginner

Info

Key: F major
Tempo: Allegro
Style: Romantic

Will improve your

- ✓ Finger agility
- ✓ Rhythmic grasp
- ✓ Evenness of tone

This charming, lively little piece is full of energy and brio. It's perfect for those with elementary skills (around Grade 2-3 level) who wish to tackle rapid scalic passagework combined with a crisp, dance-like rhythm. Beginner to intermediate pianists will appreciate the joyful and melodious 'pipers' thematic material and the fairly straightforward diatonic harmony.

Marked Allegro, this piece requires a swift pace. Experiment with tempo. A metronome speed of approximately dotted crotchet equals 120 beats per minute is probably ideal. You may also want to listen to the recording on the covermount CD for a clear overview of tempo, phrasing and dynamic markings.

Fingering is crucial due to the fast, fleeting passagework in the right hand (RH). This passagework is the primary technical challenge throughout. I have suggested some fingering, which is printed in the score, but you can change it and adjust to suit your hand.

Separate hand practice is also important. Start with the left-hand (LH) part, which consists of static chords centred on the key (F major). The chordal patterns are similar throughout, and the accents require a firm finger grip cushioned by a flexible wrist that will allow the finger tips to sink into the key bed producing a warm sound.

Every LH chord has a middle C, played by the thumb. To voice each chord effectively, give the lower note greater emphasis, tone and shape (the notes F and A on beats one 1 and 2 in bar 1, for example). Try balancing the hand towards the weaker fingers, the fourth and the fifth, and make sure they strike each note fully, stroking the keys using plenty of arm weight. The transfer of weight from the stronger side of the hand to the weaker should encourage the thumb to play lightly. Legato is a crucial feature in the LH, and without it, the use of some pedal may be



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necessary [see house pianist Chenyin Li's suggested pedal markings on the score]. As the LH remains in the same position, it's quite feasible to join every chord. Aim to produce a smooth legato tone, which involves transferring finger weight evenly, while at the same time bringing out the secondary melodic material in the lower part of each chord.

An interesting character trait in this piece is the use of phrasing in the melodic line. The 6/8 time signature combined with the rests on many of the second quavers (in the groups of three per dotted crotchet), provides a wonderful dance-like feel akin to a jig, capturing the flavour of pipers playing. This rhythm requires disciplined practice and an incisive pulse is necessary. Practise at half speed to begin with, counting aloud to account for each beat. Doing this will guard against 'rushing' the rests, and will lead to a stable pulse and a bouncy, cheerful quality.

Articulation is paramount, especially in the RH. Phrasing also needs vigilance. The fingering for passages such as bars 5-8 requires frequent hand position changes, which can be very helpful for efficient articulation, forcing the fingers to leave the keyboard in order to make time for each rest. The phrase marks (or slurs) like those in bar 6, benefit from a 'drop-roll' approach, where the hand/wrist sinks down into the keys on the first note, beat 3 of the bar (in this case a G) and then rolls upwards to beat 4 (a B^b), lifting off cleanly at the end of the note. Bear in mind that note endings are often as important as their beginnings. The second note (the B^b) will be slightly lighter than the first (G), adding to the sparkling, flowing character. Note too, that the rests are crucial in a work such as this; be sure to account for every one. While the LH chords are meant to be accented, they

should still be subordinate in volume of sound to the RH melody.

Strong fingers provide total clarity in the longer scalic passages such as bars 21 to 29. One way of achieving the desired full sound is to practise producing

Learning Tip

Play the scale, arpeggio and related chords (tonic, subdominant and dominant) of F major as a primer, before you start learning the piece

a large tone, with each finger working independently on the fingertip pad, going down, deep into the key bed, encouraging each finger to gather strength.

At the four-part chords at bar 37 the outer parts of each hand must highlight the melodic material (especially the RH top line). Practise this line alone, without the other parts, shaping and colouring the melody, before adding the accompanying lines softly. Then put hands together slowly, increasing the speed accordingly and employing the metronome for total rhythmic reliability.

In this piece, Gounod presents us with a wide range of dynamics, from *ppp* to *ff*. This should be taken into account from the outset. It's much easier to build tonal changes into a piece during the early stages of learning, and it also really characterises a performance. Particularly important are the accents in the LH, the climax from bars 25-29 (*fortissimo*), and the ending from bars 46-54, which dies away to *ppp*. Be sure to observe the pause on the last chord and add some sustaining pedal for added colour too (as marked). A small rit. might work from bar 50 onwards to give the impression of a band of pipers and their catchy song drifting away into the distance. ■